ae american ethnologist
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Signifiers for the divine:

Noncompassionate aid in the French *cités*

ABSTRACT

Le Rocher is a Catholic charismatic NGO concerned with ameliorating the living conditions of immigrant populations in the French *cités*, or peripheral neighborhoods. While scholarly accounts define humanitarian practice through the idiom of compassion, Le Rocher's volunteers find compassion irrelevant to their endeavor. Instead, they articulate their mission in terms of their relationship with God, and in doing so they introduce God as an agent into the relational dynamic of the humanitarian encounter. This introduction of a third element into an otherwise dyadic relationship opens up possibilities for mutuality in a social setting in which relationships are typically defined as nonreciprocal. This highlights the need to take seriously God's agency in shaping the lives of religious actors, raising questions about the broader role that mediation, divine or otherwise, plays in establishing social relations in the contexts of aid and beyond. [*volunteerism*, *humanitarianism*, *compassion*, *charity*, *religion*, *Christianity*, *France*]

Le Rocher est une organisation non gouvernementale (ONG) catholique charismatique qui veille à améliorer les conditions de vie des populations immigrées des cités (banlieues) françaises. Tandis que les ouvrages scientifiques délimitent les pratiques humanitaires autour de la compassion, les bénévoles de Le Rocher ne la perçoivent pas comme un élément pertinent dans leur travail. Ils définissent plutôt leur mission par leur rapport avec Dieu, introduisant ainsi Dieu comme acteur dans la dynamique relationnelle au centre de l'acte humanitaire. Cette introduction d'une tierce partie dans une relation autrement dyadique ouvre des possibilités de réciprocité dans un cadre social où les relations sont généralement considérées comme non réciproques. Il en ressort la nécessité de prendre au sérieux l'entremise de Dieu dans le façonnement de la vie des acteurs religieux, ce qui soulève des questions sur le rôle plus large que la médiation, divine ou autre, joue dans l'établissement de relations sociales dans les contextes d'aide et en général. [*bénévolat*, *humanitarisme*, *compassion*, *charité*, *religion*, *christianisme*, *France*]

I walked into the Rocher center in the early morning with my fellow volunteers, returning from church after Mass and adoration. Everyone was milling about, tidying things and organizing schedules. As we settled down with our morning cups of coffee, however, Inès, our center's director, addressed the group with an unmistakable air of excitement.[1] She wanted to tell us something important, something told to her the day before by Safi, a youth from the *cité*, the inner-city neighborhood where we were working. Safi was a 20-year-old "Rocher kid," as the center's director affectionately referred to him. Born in France to an Algerian family, Safi had been frequenting the Rocher center since his childhood, and was now volunteering at the center for several hours each day. While chatting with him, Inès told us, she had asked Safi why he continued to come. After all, she told him, all the aid he gets from the Rocher could just as easily be accessed from the local social services center, the Maison Service Publique (MSP). "And you know what he said?" Inès asked us. She was touched by this, it was evident. "He told me, 'You are like a second family to me. There in the MSP, I'm a nobody, I'm invisible. Here I'm somebody, here I exist.'"

I was just completing the first few weeks of my work with the Rocher, and the reaction of my fellow volunteers was striking in what seemed like excessive enthusiasm and joy. "Did you tell him to tell the others this?" "Wow, that's just incredible, it's fantastic, how wonderful!" Inès had asked Safi why he didn't tell others how he felt about the Rocher. "Well," he answered, "I can't walk around the cité telling people that the Rocher is my second family." I could imagine Safi's shy, incredulous smile. "Yes," everyone agreed, "of course. It would be complicated for him to do that. People would judge." The Rocher, or "the church," as it was commonly referred to by the young people in the cité, was no family for a young Muslim man. Safi could not make his feelings public, but it seemed to suffice that he would verbalize them to us. It was a good day in the Rocher. The work we were doing was obviously worthwhile.

Le Rocher Oasis des Cités—the Rock, Oasis of the Cités—is a development NGO founded by the Communauté de l'Emmanuel, a transnational Catholic charismatic community established in the

AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 276–288, ISSN 0094-0496, online
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DOI: 10.1111/amet.12910

early 1970s in France. The Rocher's mission is to address what it views as a growing crisis of the cités, the housing projects located in the outskirts of the large French cities. Often referred to as *zones urbaines sensibles* (sensitive urban zones), most cités are populated by second- and third-generation Muslim immigrants from North Africa, and they have higher-than-average rates of poverty, unemployment, and academic underperformance (ONZUS 2013). As part of their mission to address the "crisis of the cités" and to "break the cycle" that traps children in a life of crime and underachievement, Rocher volunteers commit to live in the cité for a minimum of one year. Relocation to the cité is required of all the NGO's volunteers and staff, enacting the organization's policy of *vivre avec*, or "living with." By "living with" and alongside residents of the cité, instead of merely visiting the cité to dispense aid, the Rocher hopes to facilitate greater understanding between and closeness with the NGO's staff and the cité's residents. It is through this closeness that trust (*confiance*), which the organization deems necessary for development, is made possible, and so it is through the act of "being neighbors" that the Rocher considers its mission to be realized.

Considering, then, the terms in which the organization frames its mission, one can more easily understand the enthusiasm I observed that morning after Safi's declaration of kinship. In asserting that he belonged to the Rocher, that he was "somebody" among Rocher volunteers, as opposed to "nobody" among those who dispense aid at the MSP, Safi was powerfully validating the volunteers' mission. This event also brings to the fore the question of how Rocher volunteers conceive of their ethical obligations to those whom they seek to aid, and the relational consequences of this commitment.

Counter to scholarly accounts that accord a central role to compassion in defining humanitarian reason and action, I found that in the case of the Rocher, compassion, or the notion of feeling for the suffering Other, did not factor in volunteers' ethical motivation to engage in aid or in their volunteering experience more broadly. While my interlocutors' initial motivations varied, none of them articulated their ethical commitment as compassionate giving. Instead, they described their mission as an effort to create relations of fellowship with cité residents. This aspiration to fellowship went hand in hand with volunteers' framing of their mission vis-à-vis their personal relationship with God, and resulted in the introduction of God as an agent into the relational dynamic of the humanitarian encounter.

This purposeful introduction of divine presence into human sociality transforms the dyadic humanitarian relation (*I* give *you*) into a triadic relationship in which giving is always mediated in one form or another by the person of God. In this setting, the shift from dyad to triad removes benevolence or other paternalistic sentiments from the relational structure of the humanitarian encounter, opening up possibilities for intimacy or mutuality in a milieu in which relations are implicitly defined by a nonreciprocal or transactional dynamic. The role that divine mediation plays in facilitating mutuality in the religious humanitarian case highlights the need to take seriously God's agency in shaping the social lives of religious actors. It also raises questions about the role that mediation may play in facilitating intersubjectivity in the context of aid and beyond.

Humanitarianism and the politics of compassion

The scholarly critique of humanitarian practice and reason is multifaceted, targeting at once the logic of humanitarianism as a form of governance, the failings of humanitarian practice to effect lasting structural change, and its pernicious effects on social relations. Much of this critique targets the melding of politics and affect that is characteristic of humanitarianism, specifically its anchoring in "moral sentiments" such as compassion. The politics of love and compassion are disparaged as "nonrevolutionary" (Muehlebach 2012, 456), since they fail to fight societal inequalities, buttressing instead neoliberal policies of personal accountability. Similarly, in framing the imperative to relieve suffering in sentimental rather than political terms, humanitarianism risks displacing possibilities for structural change while occluding what makes aid necessary in the first place (Ticktin 2011, 2014). That the politics of compassion is a politics of benevolence also makes it arbitrary, since it hinges on sufferers' capacity to communicate their pain in a way that is affectively effective, inspiring feelings of benevolence in those with the power to dispense it as they see fit (Adams 2013; Berlant 2004; Boltanski 2004).

Affect is also centrally implicated in the kind of relationships that humanitarian interaction seems to create. This is because the humanitarian relation is structurally founded on the paradox of solidarity and inequality (Elisha 2008, 2011; Feldman and Ticktin 2010). According to this view, humanitarian logic operates on the assumption that practitioners recognize a shared humanity in the suffering Other, yet they do so within a politics of inequality, insofar as humanitarian giving amounts to bestowing benevolence on the vulnerable. This fundamental tension between a relation of domination and one of assistance constitutes humanitarian governance writ large, and it is the paradoxical nature of this relation that accounts for the recurrence of an indifference to suffering in donors on the one hand, and feelings of shame and resentment on the part of aid recipients on the other (Fassin 2012, 3).

Implicit in anthropologists' treatment of the humanitarian relation is a reading of Marcel Mauss's (1990) concept of the gift as an agonistic exchange in which giving is ultimately a selfish act aimed at securing power for the giver (cf. Parry 1986). It is in light of this reading that Pierre Bourdieu

(1977) characterizes the gift that cannot be reciprocated as a prime example of symbolic violence, and in this vein that Mary Douglas (1990, vii) asserts that "though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know that it wounds." Because the humanitarian relation is based on an act of unilateral giving, in which reciprocity, or at least an equal reciprocity is often impossible, it is then read within much of anthropology as an act of violence, a structural fault of humanitarian reason per se (Bornstein 2009; Fassin 2012).

Such critiques of humanitarian logic and its practice are as cogent as they are necessary. Recently, however, ethnographic accounts have emerged that question whether a critique of humanitarian values and practices in and of themselves can sometimes miss the ethnographic mark. Erica Weiss (2015, 277), for example, shows that conscientious objectors in Israel used empathy to motivate radical political goals and that for them, empathy or compassion as *values* were part of a "culturally embedded ethical tradition." Following Dipesh Chakrabarty (2001), Weiss suggests that rather than pathologizing humanitarian empathy, anthropologists would be better served by provincializing it, challenging its claims to universality without dismissing its potential potency in certain cultural settings. China Scherz's (2014) work on sustainable development projects and charity in Uganda touches on another central aspect of the anthropological critique of humanitarianism: that relations of dependency in which gifts are not reciprocated inflict a form of violence on aid recipients. This is not so in Uganda, Scherz finds, where unreciprocated gift giving is a viable and even desirable form of socially relating to others.

Amira Mittermaier's (2014) work on Islamic charity in Egypt, although meant as a critique of humanitarian sentiment, offers us another case in which practices of humanitarian giving are structured around a nonsentimental ethical framework. Mittermaier's interlocutors, engaged as they were in works of charity and aid, explicitly opposed defining their mission in terms of compassionate giving. Rejecting compassion as liberal, Western, and Christian, they suggest an Islamic ethical alternative, in which the moral imperative to give is anchored not in fellow feeling but in the act of obeying God, and the performance of religious duties aimed at securing one's place in heaven.

The ethnographic case presented here resonates with these recent accounts; it too sits uncomfortably with the characterization of humanitarian practice as either necessarily based in ineffectual sentimentality or as invariably producing a particular relational dynamic. Unlike Mittermaier's Islamic interlocutors, the Catholic volunteers I worked with did not reject compassion as a virtue in and of itself, nor were they as emphatic or explicit in rejecting compassionate aid per se. Throughout my time with the Rocher, however, I never heard volunteers frame their mission in terms of relieving suffering or helping those in need, nor did these motivations feature in volunteers' narratives when I directly asked them what drove them to volunteer with the Rocher. This indifference to compassion is perhaps more surprising in the Catholic than it is in the Islamic case, considering how differently Christian and Islamic theologies articulate charitable giving.

Islamic charity (Arabic: *zakat*) is not cast in affective terms or as reflecting on the compassion or care of the donor. Rather, *zakat* is explicitly articulated within an exchange relation: giving is considered a counterservice to God for what has already been received (since one's wealth originates with Allah). People also perform zakat to help ensure themselves a reward from God in the afterlife (Kochuyt 2009, 107). In contrast with zakat, Christian charity incorporates affect by definition. For example, the Greek word for love, *agape*, is commonly translated into English as either "charity" or "love," and it is consistently translated in the Vulgate as "charity," or *caritas*. Humanitarianism and humanitarian sentiments are historically and genealogically tied with Christian notions of charity and sacrificial love (Fassin 2012; Povinelli 2009; Silber 2002), and the church's call to aid is explicitly anchored in the ethical imperative to love. In the particular case of the Rocher, fellow feelings, expressed in the organization's aspiration to create relations of "neighborliness" with cité residents, are central to the NGO's self-definition. I would, however, suggest that the Rocher's indifference to compassion as a motivation for aid becomes comprehensible in the Catholic case as well once we seriously consider not only the different relational impulses implied in the act of love versus that of compassion, but also how the presence and person of God shape volunteers' relation to the social more broadly.

Mittermaier (2014, 2019) uses her interlocutors' rejection of compassion and their casting of aid in triadic terms to argue for an ethical alternative to humanitarian giving, a view from elsewhere that espouses a nonsentimental motivation for aid. The materials I present here investigate the potential impact that this kind of approach has on the shape and dynamic of relational structures, which in this case is based not on obedience to God or an aspiration for the afterlife, but on the weaving of divine presence into daily social interactions. By taking seriously the agency of God in shaping alternative conceptions and modes of action in the context of aid, I point to the role that mediation, divine or otherwise, can play in constituting social relations.

Before proceeding with the ethnographic case, however, a brief clarification on my use of *humanitarianism*. Defining the term is difficult because it is polysemic, being at once "an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government" (Ticktin 2014, 274). Earlier anthropological works attempted to delineate the boundaries of humanitarianism by differentiating it from other forms of aid, such as development, human rights, or charity (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Wilson and Brown 2008).

The expansion of the humanitarian industry, however, is collapsing these boundaries, creating "different forms of humanitarianism" and "blurring the boundaries with older and newer political and ethical forms" (Ticktin 2014, 281; see also Davies 2012).

One area where boundaries are being reworked is the rapidly growing field of faith-based aid, in which long-standing traditions of charity and relief intersect with, adopt, or challenge newer humanitarian principles and forms (Benthall 2011; Bornstein 2012; Elisha 2008; Scherz 2013, 2014). Accordingly, throughout this text I am using a very minimal definition of *humanitarianism*. This definition does away with older stresses on the alleviation of material suffering through the lending of medical aid in cases of emergency. Instead, I treat humanitarianism as an ethos and mode of action at the root of which lies the moral imperative to intervene for the advancement of the good and well-being of others.

The Rock, Oasis of the Cités

The arguments presented here took shape during 22 months of fieldwork I conducted in France and Rwanda from 2010 to 2014 with the Emmanuel Community and its two NGOs, Le Rocher Oasis des Cités and Fidesco International. The materials I present here were gathered during an academic year I spent as a full-time volunteer with the Rocher.[2] Emmanuel is part of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a lay movement within the Catholic Church.[3] Since its inception in 1967 in the United States, the Renewal has rapidly spread around the world and is today represented in about 240 countries. With respect to theology and practice, the movement can be considered a synthesis of Catholicism and Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal or charismatic elements in its ritual practice are exemplified in its emphasis on an experience of the Holy Spirit, the establishment of a close and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and the practice of charisms, or spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy.[4] Because it originated in the United States, scholars invariably interpret the Renewal against the backdrop of Protestantism and Pentecostal Christianity, emphasizing the movement's charismatic and individualistic elements (Csordas 1997). The Renewal emerges in anthropological scholarship as apolitical, its members concerned primarily with cultivating a particular self or "interiority" rather than directly enacting social change (e.g., Csordas 1997; McGuire 1982). This, however, is untrue in the case of Emmanuel, whose concern with transforming the self does not supplant but rather complements its goal of transforming society, which it seeks to achieve through its charities and NGOs.[5] Emmanuel's humanitarian ventures must also be interpreted against the backdrop of what Pope John Paul II referred to as "the New Evangelization," or the relatively recent imperative directed at the church's laity to evangelize and transform their own societies. Although Emmanuel's social outreach is intricately tied with the community's spiritual aspirations to evangelize the world, evangelization is not, in fact, part of the Rocher's stated mission or practice. Furthermore, because the Rocher is not classified as a religious organization, and because it receives public funds, it is legally prohibited from any overt religious expression. While most volunteers I interacted with viewed their mission not only in social but also in spiritual terms, I never observed Rocher staff or volunteers try to convert aid recipients.

The Rocher was created by the Emmanuel Community in the year 2000 to address what it saw as a growing crisis of the cités, areas that have come to be associated in France with issues of ethnicity, immigration, and minority integration, but also with a threat of fundamentalist Islam, inspiring what can be described as "moral panic" (Wacquant 2007, 7). While Islam enjoys a greater degree of acceptance and institutional support in France than it does in other European countries (Giry 2006), and while French Muslims themselves emphasize their French national identity to a greater degree than Muslims do elsewhere (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006), the social climate in France retains "strong doses of hostility to an Islamic public presence" (Bowen 2009, 440). Although much of the French ambivalence toward Islam can be read in light of a cultural Christian heritage that views it as a threat, as well as painful memories of the colonization of North African countries and the Algerian war (MacMaster 1997), negative attitudes toward Islam and its forms of public expression, such as the veil, also stem from France's particular and institutionalized form of secularism, *laïcité* (Roy 2005).

The organization's name—the Rock, Oasis of the Cités—alludes to a scene from Exodus 17:6 in which Moses, leading the people of Israel in the desert, is instructed by God to "strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink." In this allegory the cités are seen as a desert, inhabited by those who thirst for water, and the Rocher is an oasis of life within it. In broad terms, the organization considers the solution to the "social crisis of the cités" to be primarily an educational one. Since the children of the cités spend most of their time in the streets, the Rocher asserts, they are inevitably exposed to trafficking and violence and find themselves socialized into a life of crime. Seeking to break this cycle, the Rocher targets young children and parents who reside in the cité. To achieve this mission, the organization aims to create a "social mixture" of people who originate from different "social horizons," which is facilitated by implementing the Rocher's strict policy of "living with." In accordance with this principle, all Rocher volunteers and employees, including center directors who commit to their post for a minimum of five years, relocate to a Habitation à Loyer Modéré (HLM),

or rent-controlled housing in the cité where they will be holding their post.

Rocher staff consider many of the cité's ills as stemming from isolation and lack of communication between residents. The isolation of women who rarely leave their homes, the lack of community cohesion and solidarity, the strong divisions and at times animosity between different ethnic groups, parents' inability to keep their children from joining gangs—all these were cited to me as the core issues that the Rocher seeks to address in the cité. Framing the core problem in relational terms—isolation and the inhibition of social ties—the Rocher likewise defined its solution in these terms, with the goal of providing cité residents the opportunity to form relationships with others. These others were often fellow inhabitants of the cité itself, and the mission of facilitating relations was realized through organizing neighborhood events and initiatives.

Facilitating a social encounter with others was also conceived by the Rocher in terms of helping cité residents integrate into French society at large, which the organization sought to achieve by helping professionalize young adults (e.g., helping them write CVs and seek employment) and initiating adult-literacy projects. Efforts to facilitate integration also focused on instilling children with certain values, such as the importance of responsibility, commitment to community service, and an aspiration to excellence, as well as tutoring them in school subjects and extracurricular activities. Of particular importance were excursions and trips aiming to expose children to French life outside the cité, which many of them rarely left otherwise.

Although not part of the Rocher's official mission, the emphasis on an encounter with Others extends to volunteers' experience. Rocher directors regarded it as a desirable side effect of the organization's activities that volunteers could meaningfully interact with people of very different cultural, religious, and class backgrounds. This valuation of an encounter with alterity is anchored in Emmanuel's conceptualization of social relations as a site of potential divine revelation and of social friction as facilitating spiritual reflection (Itzhak, forthcoming). Volunteers, meanwhile, typically came from relatively homogeneous milieus, and they almost inevitably embarked on their mission while harboring a host of preconceived ideas about the cités and their residents. This, alongside the Rocher's commitment to establishing social relations with Others, meant that the center's staff and volunteers never denied or minimized the otherness of the cité and its Muslim residents in favor of a more universalizing vision that stressed underlying commonalities.

The Rocher runs projects in eight different locations in France. Each year 20 to 30 volunteers, most of them in their 20s or early 30s, leave on one- or two-year missions. The process of selecting and training volunteers lasts four to eight months before a mission begins, and it includes a two-week-long discernment session aimed to help candidates decide whether going on mission with the Rocher is the right choice, followed by a three-week training session. Although the Rocher is not classified as a religious organization, with few exceptions, most full-time Rocher volunteers and staff are practicing Catholics, although most are not members of the Emmanuel Community or the Charismatic Renewal. Despite this, volunteers are obligated to participate in the religious and social activities of the local Emmanuel Community branch, such as prayer groups and community weekend gatherings, as well as daily attendance of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, and praise.

While the Charismatic Renewal in France began in the 1970s as a largely middle-class movement, Emmanuel's membership over the years has increasingly come from the upper and upper-middle classes, as well the nobility. This is largely a result of the historical links between Catholicism and the former French monarchy, making Emmanuel one of the more politically and socially conservative of the French "new communities" today. Rocher volunteers are typically more socially heterogeneous than members, but many of them are upper or upper-middle class and politically conservative.

As a Catholic organization composed primarily of young privileged French volunteers, the Rocher enjoyed a mixed reception in the cité. During my time as a volunteer, the Rocher van was vandalized twice, and the year before my arrival a Paris branch director was assaulted. Amira, a neighbor who maintained a close relationship with the Rocher, often told me that not all residents of the cité were happy with a Catholic organization in their midst. Indeed, while the Rocher maintained steady relationships with many families, most cité residents had little to no meaningful interaction with the organization. On the whole, however, outright conflict was an anomaly.

In imitation of Christ

When she decided to work as the director of a Rocher branch, Inès, a consecrated sister of the Emmanuel Community, committed to relocate to the cité for at least five years.[6] All directors were obligated to serve for that minimal period, and everyone working for the Rocher was to live in the cité, among those they sought to aid. Life in a cité HLM was not easy or pleasant, but for Inès this was not a price to pay for her mission but rather the mission's very point. When I asked her why she chose the Rocher, she said her main reason was a desire to establish an affinity with the suffering of God, by inflicting on herself the conditions of poverty that she believed life in the cité could offer her. Unlike most volunteers, Inès also mentioned a desire to help the poor as part of what motivated her mission. She did so, however, by introducing God into the relational equation in a way that subverted its otherwise dyadic dynamic:

> I am looking for people to show them the love of God, it is true. But for the affection that I can give them, without expecting a return. Often, in our relationships with others, we are in a place of exchange . . . well, at the same time I won't say that I don't expect a return, because I know that if I came here, it's for that. [. . .] My mission at the Rocher, concretely, is this—it's to be a sign in the cité of the presence of God, through my life, and the choice of poverty, through living beside the poor, and by "being with" [*être avec*]. I am not here to save them. Let's be clear. I don't have a pretension to save them.[7]

When I asked her whether her refusal to "save" people referred to spiritual or social saving, Inès rejected both:

> [I don't want to save them] in any way whatsoever. In the sense that I am not better than them. Yes, I have a certain richness that I am sharing with them, but they likewise have things to share. It's an exchange. "Living with" [*vivre avec*] is exactly that. Because "living with" creates relations with people, relations of confidence, of simplicity, of equal to equal. We are not an institution that is here to help disadvantaged people.

If we are to understand how, in the context of the Rocher mission, relations were shaped by practitioners' rejection of the compassionate position and their introduction of divine presence into sociality, a few elements in Inès's ethical framing merit our attention. First, even when framing her work as caring for "the poor," Inès clearly views her mission not in sentimental terms, as a desire to help those in need motivated by feelings of care, but as an act of conforming to the will of God, articulated in the church's call to "prioritize" the poor. Understanding how Inès's introduction of divine presence into her social interactions with cité residents could facilitate mutuality requires giving closer attention to her grappling with her own expectation of exchange or "return" (denying it and then asserting it), as well as her adamant rejection of any pretense to save those she aids.

Inès's initial insistence on not expecting an exchange, which she then quickly withdraws, admitting that she does expect something in return, touches on something fundamental about the dynamic of the humanitarian relation. Hierarchical and unequal by definition, the humanitarian relation is supposedly based on an idea of free giving. One cannot realistically expect reciprocity from those who enter into the relationship for reasons of extreme lack or distress. Where an expectation for exchange does seem to powerfully enter, however, is in donors' expectation to see their considerable efforts bear fruit, meaning that aid recipients' lives tangibly improve. If this does not happen, or does not happen according to one's specifications, aid workers can become disillusioned and exhausted, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "compassion fatigue."

According to Omri Elisha (2008, 155–56), evangelicals engaged in an outreach initiative in Tennessee attributed compassion fatigue to "frustrating experiences of being resisted or manipulated by irresponsible and unrepentant beneficiaries of charitable aid." They cited this as one of the greatest challenges to social outreach, and often as the reason that volunteers withdrew from aid work altogether. Compassion fatigue also features in other ethnographic accounts as the nearly inevitable consequence of the humanitarian effort, the tragic morphing of the fervor to do good into a vindictive anger, triggered by the failure of beneficiaries of aid to show the appropriate, expected transformation after intervention (Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2011). If we were to frame this in Maussian terms, compassion fatigue would be the antagonistic reaction to one's gift going repeatedly unreciprocated, even as the expectation for return is unarticulated or seen as illegitimate. We can see, then, how Inès's rejection of the idea of changing or "saving" cité residents, while also admitting that she does desire some kind of return from them, could keep some of the risks of compassion fatigue at bay.

Inès's rejection of the "saving position" is largely facilitated by the introduction of God to the humanitarian relation. By conceiving of herself as "a sign in the cité of the presence of God," she frames her actions as ultimately motivated by an agency not her own. If, following Mauss again, we consider that gifting always carries a sacrifice, a giving of some part or aspect of the self, then Inès's partial disavowal of agency in this context helps offset compassion fatigue by partially dissociating her from her own giving act, and thus diminishing her attachment or expectation for return, in this case seeing "results" for her actions. Not conceiving of herself as the true author of the gifting act, then, means that less damage is inflicted on her self when her gift goes unreciprocated. This is not to say that Rocher volunteers were actually free of the threat of compassion fatigue. I had observed practically every member of the team go through periodic bouts of doubt or moments of crisis as they reflected on the meaning and effectiveness of their mission, and concluded that change, whether social, cultural, or spiritual, was not evident. Keeping feelings of frustration, self-doubt, or anger from taking over was not a given; it was, rather, a task that required work. This work, as we can glean from Inès's account, hinges on introducing divine agency into the relational structure of the humanitarian encounter, and doing so in a way that decenters the self's agency in relation to God's.

Moreover, by considering herself "a sign in the cité of the presence of God" and conceiving of her actions as ultimately motivated by an agency not her own, Inès comes to define her mission not as giving, changing, or "saving," but as primarily concerned with establishing a copresence between aid recipients and the divine. It is in this sense that Inès sees her mission as defined by the notion of *living with*,

or *being with*, a relational stance through which she comes to define the ultimate goal of her mission not as a transactional exchange but as a conversational one, an exchange aimed at achieving a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1997, 302), or the dialogical transformation of the self. Whether by minimizing the effects of compassion fatigue or by reframing the ultimate goal of mission, then, it is the introduction of God into the dyadic humanitarian relation that undermines the implicitly transactional logic of the humanitarian relation, opening up possibilities for constituting relations based in mutuality.

God is the common denominator

Not all Rocher volunteers chose to go on mission to follow in the footsteps of Christ, as did Inès. Their initial reasons for volunteering varied. Some highlighted professional aspirations that led them to seek work with an NGO, while others felt it was their Christian duty to God to serve the poor. A few of my interlocutors felt that going on mission would be a way of disrupting their daily routines and comforts, thus helping them grow spiritually and become closer to God. Benjamin's decision, according to his account, was primarily motivated by a desire to "know the world of the cité firsthand," something he wished to do since the cités represented one of the most pressing political and social issues in France. Having been involved in politics before (and after) his term with the Rocher, Benjamin believed that an overtly Christian presence in the largely Muslim cités could transform something about the conflicted social realities in France. This was to be achieved not by converting Muslims but by creating closeness between them and Christians by virtue of their joint belief in God:

> I wanted to go and be a witness of a presence that goes beyond, that exceeds [*une présence qui dépasse*]. A witness of the message of the love of Christ. And I told myself, I don't have the answer to the problem of the cité. This needs to be addressed by the state, but for the moment, nothing is done . . . but I told myself, the people who live in the cité, they often have a devalued view of the West, that we dress like you-know-what [i.e., they dress immodestly], a world that has lost the sense of the sacred. And maybe they can change their image, to see that the West is not only what you see in the media, that there are also the Christians. [. . .] We are very few, but the fact that we are living here in the cité calls us to go beyond this kind of opposition, this dichotomy that is being created between Muslim believers and Western secularists, with a conflict that crystallizes around such issues as the veil, etc. [. . .] And on the other hand, I said to myself, this visibility of the Christian faith can move the [French] secularists to modify their perception of religion—if they see [through the work of the Rocher] that Christianity is a religion that [. . .] is based in the heart of the human being, that it's not something ritualistic, superficial.

Like Inès, Benjamin also questions how much social change the Rocher's work can achieve. This is, however, not because he rejects a "saving" position but because, as he says, "we are few," and resolving the social precariousness of the cité is the state's responsibility. Like Inès, however, Benjamin also implicitly rejects the compassionate dyadic position, conceiving of his relation to the cité residents as mediatory rather than directly dialogical, a relation that signifies a "presence" that exceeds him, a transcendence that exceeds life. Benjamin's rejection of the compassionate position does not lead him to formulate his mission in more intimate, intersubjective terms, as does Inès. Instead he goes a level higher, positioning himself as a representative of a particular social group and his mission as a conduit for ameliorating interreligious and intercultural tensions in France.

God is inserted into social relations here to create a commonality between Muslims and Catholics while establishing an affinity between secular (humanist) French and Catholic French.[8] It is an empathic process based on similarity that Benjamin aspires to, a move of making the strange familiar by creating bridges of similarity between normally antagonistic groups. The transcendent God serves here, for Benjamin, as a third element through which French society is supposed to be transformed in the eyes of Muslim believers (who will realize that *some* French people—volunteers of the Rocher—share with them a belief in God). Meanwhile the witnessing of one's relationship with Jesus as close, personal, and loving, the results of which are displayed in social outreach, serves to transform Catholicism in the eyes of French secularists (who will realize that religious practice is not empty and ritualistic but shares in their humanistic values). Rather than feeling for the poor and doing something to help them, then, Benjamin considers his mission a way of reframing current public debates about immigrant integration and Islam in France vis-à-vis the question of religion's place in the public sphere.

Although Benjamin's stated motivation and mission framing differ considerably from Inès's, in both cases compassionate giving is eschewed in favor of mediating divine presence into sociality, for Benjamin's either as the common denominator for Muslim and Christian believers, or the element that casts Christian religious practice as more authentic or acceptable for French nonbelievers. And here as well divine mediation makes it possible to establish fellowship or mutuality, articulated in Benjamin's case as a desire for greater affinity and understanding between members of often-antagonistic groups.

Moved by the Holy Spirit

Unlike both Inès and Benjamin, who refused the saving position in either spiritual or social terms, Jean-Pierre, a young volunteer at a neighboring cité, defined his mission in clearly evangelical, salvific terms. When he first shared with me his ideas about the "problem of the cité," Jean-Pierre was convinced that its only solution was the eventual conversion of the cité's Muslim population to Christianity. Jean-Pierre acted on his conviction, often engaging young Muslim men in the neighborhood in theological debates about God, Islam, and Christianity, something most volunteers avoided.

Several months into his mission, however, Jean-Pierre concluded that the Muslim population of the cité would not convert to Christianity in his lifetime. When I asked him whether he felt his mission was progressing well, he seemed to have accepted that the Rocher was not going to be "the solution for the cité" and dismissed his initial plan as "a very human vision." This human vision, he told me, needed to be replaced with a more "prophetic vision for the Rocher, of being a Christian presence, being a sign." Like both Inès and Benjamin, then, in the course of his mission, Jean-Pierre came to frame his mission not as an attempt to give, change, or save but as an effort centered on mediating divine presence in his social relations with cité residents.

What becomes evident when considering Jean-Pierre's process is that the experience of mission in itself socializes Rocher volunteers into a particular way of understanding their mission, and thus their relationship with both God and the broader community in which they operate. This socializing purpose is in fact acknowledged by NGO directors, who consider the disillusionment that volunteers such as Jean-Pierre feel when their mission seems to fail as an opportunity to learn to decenter their agency in favor of God's. Of the essence for our argument here, however, is not the degree to which volunteers are socialized into having a particular stance vis-à-vis the divine, but the relational consequences that this reorientation has.

By abandoning his role as giver-receiver or evangelizer-converted and adopting a mediatory stance as facilitator of the divine, Jean-Pierre positioned his relationship with those he sought to aid in the much broader temporal frame of divine action. Within this divine or "prophetic" time frame, Jean-Pierre was no longer personally responsible for converting Muslims to Christianity. Instead, he was now a member of a triadic relation, playing but a small part in a greater story authored by God, which he believed would culminate eventually, though not in his lifetime, in religious conversion and spiritual salvation.

Like Inès, Jean-Pierre addressed the threat of compassion fatigue by decentering his own agency in relation to God's, considering the limits of his "human vision" and conceiving of change (in this case conversion) as authored and directed by the divine. Recasting his relation with cité residents as wholly mediatory similarly moved Jean-Pierre to measure the efficacy of his mission as a function of creating relations of fellowship with residents of the cité, the mark of a successful mediation of divine presence into sociality. After saying he no longer believed his mission goals would be realized, I asked Jean-Pierre to give me an example of a successful action by the Rocher or an event in the course of mission that struck him as particularly positive and satisfying. He replied with an example of accompanying a child, Yassin, back home and meeting with his mother. Initially approaching the mother to speak to her about the possibility of Yassin attending the Rocher summer camp, the conversation quickly turned more personal, as Jean-Pierre asked the mother how long she and her family have been living in the cité, an act he felt communicated his genuine interest in and care for her:

> This woman, Samira, it wasn't just her son's camp that interested me, it was her that interested me, to get to know who she is, how she lives, to really know her. It's not obligatory, but at the moment you do it, people feel it. When I asked her, gently, politely, "And you, has it been a long time that you have been living here?" it was not intrusive. She could keep her freedom not to reveal anything, but at the same time she felt that I was genuinely interested in her. And so she told me [her story]. And I continued, really with a lot of gentleness, to ask her questions, and she at some point started to cry, and I felt, yes, it was a very painful history. And I thought to myself, this woman, I have only known her, really, for half an hour. I only came up to talk about her son, I only introduced myself generally, and really just through the small questions, the gentleness of my attitude, the Holy Spirit opened my heart, and she confided in me, even though she didn't know me.

Jean-Pierre attributed Samira's willingness to open up to him to the action of the Holy Spirit, working through him:

> It was like having trust with a person who has known you for many years. [. . .] It's there that you see that it's mysterious, that it's not simply that the person just had a need to be listened to, but that the Holy Spirit has been working there, so that in that moment she opened her heart and cried and all that. You say, this is where I see this goes beyond me. And it's there that you see the profundity of the mission of the Rocher, that it is not just to educate the children, to love them, to do things for them, but then you go see their parents, you encourage them, you greet them, and you don't only propose to them a service, a camp for the summer, but you offer them a listening ear, friendship. And so she told me at the end, thank you, this has helped me. You could see she wasn't someone that just talks about her problems to anyone.

The intimacy that is the hallmark of the dyadic love relation, Georg Simmel (1950) tells us, is ultimately a function of information exchange that depends on both exposure and secrecy—intimacy is created not only by a sharing of information but by the implication that this sharing is somewhat exclusive, given to the other person but not to others outside the dyad (see also Gell 2011). It was this establishment of intimacy in such a short period and across such cultural divides that led Jean-Pierre to conclude that his interaction with Samira was made possible by the mysterious intervention of the Holy Spirit. In Jean-Pierre's account it is the surprising, the unexpected, or uncharacteristic that marks the presence and operation of the divine in social interaction. And as is the case of Inès, Jean-Pierre's success in mediating divine presence, opening himself to the touch of the Holy Spirit, becomes evident to him in his ability to establish mutuality, to create what he deems significant relational interactions with cité residents.

Being neighbors

I have thus far argued that in the case of the Rocher, establishing mutuality is facilitated by the decentering of the self and the introduction of divine agency into social relations. In arguing this, I have relied primarily on volunteers' own accounts of their mission experience. This was necessary to establish the varied ways that mediating divine presence implicitly defined and found expression in their motivation to engage in aid, and in the nature of their ethical commitment to this effort. In and of itself, volunteers' very conceptualization of aid draws our attention to alternative ways of being in the world with others and to new possibilities of conceptualizing relationality in the context of aid.

The question we are left with, however, is whether and to what degree this move from dyad to triad actually bore fruit. Did Rocher volunteers actually experience less compassion fatigue? Could they detach themselves sufficiently from their act of gifting and thereby avoid anger when it was not reciprocated by the expected change? And just as importantly, did the volunteers' introduction of divine agency into the relational dynamic actually have an impact on their relationship with cité residents, an impact experienced not only by them but also by supposed aid recipients? In other words, to what degree was mutuality truly established, truly a two-way affair?

Volunteers themselves did not explicitly articulate or identify the possible links between the mediation of divine presence, the establishment of triadic relationships, and the facilitation of mutuality, so my analysis of their narratives does not simply take their reflections at face value. At the same time, establishing how and to what degree mutuality came into fruition cannot be achieved by relying exclusively on volunteers' own reflections. It also requires a close exploration of interactions in the day-to-day context of aid as well as an investigation of cité residents' own experience of the aid relationship. While this is an effort that lies beyond the scope and argument of this article, some ethnographic observations on the matter are nonetheless in order.

Confronting the challenges of compassion fatigue was certainly affected by volunteers' reconception of their mission in terms of divine rather than human action, because doing so helped them combat the frustration and sense of futility that aid workers often feel when their efforts fail to bear fruit. This was by no means a straightforward matter but something that required maintenance, a back-and-forth between disappointment and surrender. Throughout my time with the Rocher, I repeatedly observed staff and volunteers move from doubt to acceptance when faced with the apparent failure of their mission, and they invariably did so by reminding themselves to displace their own agency with God's. I had, in fact, first become curious about the question of compassion fatigue after several months of volunteering, when I experienced something akin to it myself and questioned how Rocher staff persevered at their posts for years without appearing to lose heart or turn to anger. As for the impact that divine mediation had on the relationships between volunteers and residents, a more complex picture emerges.

Before considering an example that illustrates residents' response to the Rocher's project of "being neighbors," I must stress that by arguing that the introduction of divine presence facilitated the establishment of mutuality, I am not suggesting that relationships between Rocher volunteers and cité residents were in any way idyllic or free of difficulty or conflict. Rather, when speaking of mutuality, fellowship, or "neighborliness" throughout the text, I am broadly referencing what Julian Pitt-Rivers (2017) considers an aspect of relational life based not in transactional reciprocity but in gratuitous giving, or "grace." This conception draws on Émile Benveniste's (2016, 158) suggestion that "above the normal circuit of exchange—where one gives in order to obtain—there is a second circuit, that of beneficence and gratefulness, of what is given without thought of return, of what is offered in 'thankfulness.'" There is, according to this view, a constitutive social function underlying such acts as rendering neighborly aid for which a return is, if only verbally, dismissed as unnecessary.

Thus, fellowship or mutuality need not exclude conflict, friction, or disagreement. In fact, it is a moment of such relational break that I use here to assess the impact of the Rocher's broader ethical project. At the center of this conflict was Amira, a resident of the cité and a mother of two who frequented the Rocher center and maintained a fairly close relationship with staff and volunteers. It was clear from my many conversations with her that Amira approved of the Rocher's presence at the cité, but on the morning I

met her, when she came to share a cup of coffee at the center, Amira was troubled. "Why is it," she asked the group of volunteers present, "that the Rocher does not have any volunteers from the cité itself? I think it's important for you to not just have people come here from Paris and such, but to have someone from the cité, from here." Her statement was followed by an awkward silence. Several volunteers then tried to defend this reality, pointing to the Rocher's policy requiring that volunteers serve in a location other than their city of residence. One of the volunteers finally pointed out that the Rocher did employ two part-time volunteers from the cité, but this did not satisfy Amira, who kept insisting that "the Rocher needs to have someone totally contracted, just like you, who works full-time and is being paid expenses for their time."

I later raised this issue with the center's director and learned that the Rocher actually did employ at least one full-time cité resident as a volunteer in one of its Paris branches. What is material here, however, is not the Rocher's policy but Amira's insistence. That this was important to her was evident, given that she kept making this suggestion to various members of the team throughout the school year. When I spoke to her some months later, it became clear that at the heart of her insistence was a demand to "authenticate" the mutuality of the relationship through a meaningful act. Rocher volunteers, Amira insisted, "would do well to open themselves to the possibility that they can take something of value from their stay in the cité. And they should try to learn," she told me, "more than just how to make Moroccan cookies."

In her somewhat mocking suggestion, Amira was referring to how volunteers and residents used food to establish neighborliness. Female volunteers would often visit the homes of families we interacted with, learning from women how to cook a variety of North African dishes, while some households would occasionally send food to the Rocher center or invite the team for lunch or holiday dinners. This, however, was insufficient for Amira. Food was a cheap coin that could not, in her mind, establish a true reciprocity of exchange. Amira's insistence that the Rocher recruit a volunteer from the cité, and the discomfort this evoked in volunteers, reveal that the fundamental tensions plaguing the humanitarian relation and the risks of paternalism enfolded within it are far from being resolved in the work of the Rocher. Yet the fact that Amira felt justified in making the suggestion, and the fact that her suggestion evoked ambivalence and reflection rather than outright rejection, indicate that the Rocher had at least partial success in disrupting the dynamic of the traditional humanitarian relation.

Divine mediations

The propensity to displace or decenter one's agency, will, or selfhood in relation to that of God's is widely documented in the anthropological literature on Christianity (e.g., Bielo 2011; Lester 2003), often as serving the purpose of shifting the locus of authorship of one's actions, choices, or utterances to the divine so as to imbue them with an authority or veracity, and particularly so in a manner that affirms one's relationship with the divine (e.g., Robbins 2004). What the case of the Rocher highlights is how this decentering can also affirm social relations (see also Bialecki 2015). Just as importantly, however, it stresses the need for anthropologists to take seriously the agency of God in the lives of religious people with whom they engage.

That we should take seriously local claims about the agency of spiritual beings has been given some recent attention, with calls to suspend the anthropological commitment to methodological atheism in favor of "methodological indecision and openness" (Schielke 2019, 3) in studying the impact of divinities on human selves and interaction (see also Luhrmann 2018). In her work on ethical self-cultivation among Ugandan nuns, for example, China Scherz (2018) argues that taking God's agency seriously allows for a better comprehension of nuns' own understanding of their ethical lives, particularly so in helping them to accept instances in which they fail to achieve their ethical ideals (on divine agency as subject constituting, see also Lambek 2003; Mittermaier 2012).

Taking seriously God's agentive capacities in the case of the Rocher has allowed us to challenge scholarly portrayals of the humanitarian relation as necessarily based in the violence of the unreciprocated gift. At the same time, pointing to the role played by God in constituting sociality raises a broader question: What is the role played by mediation in facilitating mutuality more broadly, outside the specific contexts of either religious practice or humanitarian aid? In his classic essay on the relational dynamic of dyads and triads, George Simmel (1950, 135) identifies a potential fruitfulness enfolded in the introduction of a third element into dyadic relations. Although he considers intimacy the hallmark of the dyad, Simmel argues that the mediation of a third element serves the twofold function of uniting and separating the other two elements. It is "an enrichment" in an interactional sense, insofar as it offers us the potential to connect, indirectly, those elements that cannot meet by the direct, straight line. In so doing, the third connects and fuses the two, but in a manner that also "offers a different side to each of the other two." A third party's disruption of intimacy can also facilitate a different intimacy, a knowing that might otherwise prove impossible: "The appearance of the third party indicates transition, conciliation, and abandonment of absolute contrast" (Simmel 1950, 145). Importantly, however, it achieves this through separation, the introduction of distance into dyadic intersubjectivity.

In recent ethnographic accounts of empathy, we can find more evidence of the potentially fruitful effects that mediation or distance can have in constituting relations.

For example, Jason Throop (2010), arguing against Renato Rosaldo's (1989) famous argument that certain experiences can be understood only when one has had a homologous experience to draw on, demonstrates how a similarity of experience can actually impede rather than enhance understanding and empathy. Reflecting on how his own personal experience of loss denied him accurate access to the experience of one of his interlocutors who suffered similarly, Throop notes that he was only truly able to understand his friend's state after enough time had passed to allow him to distance himself from his own experience of loss. Throop takes this to indicate that our understanding of empathy must take into consideration and pay close attention to empathy's "temporal unfolding," and that counter to common thought, in some cases "it is precisely experiences of misunderstanding that potentiate possibilities for new horizons of mutual understanding to arise" (Throop 2010, 772).

Whether seen as a faculty of the imagination and an active exercise in perspective taking, or as an automatic affective reaction based in a process of identification, empathy is broadly if implicitly conceived of as a direct, dyadic process, a task consisting in "approximating the subjective experience of another from a quasi-first-person perspective" (Hollan and Throop 2008, 387). Within this, commonality or similarity is usually considered to promote empathy, while alterity or difference to limit its potentialities (e.g., Kirmayer 2008; Rosaldo 1989). What Throop's account highlights, however, is the potential fruitfulness that a distance, or a break in the immediacy of communication, may serve in promoting true understanding and mutuality. It is precisely this fruitful potential of mediation or distance that the ethnographic case of the Rocher points to in demonstrating how the introduction of God into human sociality, the relation to the Other *through* another, can facilitate mutuality.

Like Scherz's (2018) interlocutors, the Rocher's volunteers use divine agency to effectively deal with a perceived ethical failure, namely their inability to successfully enact change in the course of mission, and by doing so they minimize the potentially destructive effects of compassion fatigue. As we have seen, however, introducing divine agency into sociality can facilitate mutuality even more broadly. By defining their mission not in terms of compassionate giving but as a project primarily concerned with the mediation of divine presence, the Rocher's ethical project is transformed into an exercise in community making. This is because one's successful orientation to the divine is marked by the flourishing of the social in moments, small or brief as they may be, in which the self is lost to the act of love.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The research for this article was made possible by generous funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Robert Lemelson Foundation, the Society for Psychological Anthropology, and the University of California San Diego. I am grateful to the Emmanuel community, the directors of the Rocher Oasis des Cités, and the volunteers and staff of the two Rocher centers that hosted me throughout fieldwork. Special thanks are due to Sandra Commins and Inma Cendros for their support. For comments on previous drafts of this article, I am grateful to Tom Csordas, Jason Danely, Susan Digiacomo, Marcel Henaff, Jonathan Friedman, Janis Jenkins, and Joel Robbins, as well as members of UCSD's Medical and Psychological Anthropology Seminar and participants in the University of Cambridge Anthropology Department's Senior Research Seminar. Thanks are also due to the seven anonymous reviewers as well as to Niko Besnier, Michael Hathaway, Pablo Morales, and Stacy Pigg, whose insightful suggestions during the review process were particularly helpful.

1. All names of people in this text are pseudonyms.

2. Participant observation included day-to-day work alongside volunteers at the NGO centers, attending volunteer orientation and training sessions, participating in religious activities and worship, and observing Emmanuel members' daily and family lives, since throughout my fieldwork I shared the homes of either fellow volunteers or community members. While I was contracted by the Rocher as a full volunteer, other volunteers knew I was not Catholic and that my presence at the Rocher was for the purpose of conducting research.

3. The Emmanuel Community is today the largest of the charismatic or "new communities" in France, as well as one of the most influential, in terms of its public reach and engagement.

4. Pope Paul VI publicly acknowledged the movement in 1975, referring to the Renewal as a "new spring" for the church, and Pope John Paul II continued to encourage the movement throughout his pontificate. The Renewal forms one of the main driving forces behind many of the church's lay evangelization initiatives and such events as World Youth Day. At the same time, the movement's conservative politics and promotion of "traditional" values serve the church in its opposition to progressive or leftist elements growing within it, such as liberation theology, while standing as a counterforce against the spread of Pentecostalism in regions such as Latin America.

5. Humanitarian aid, development work, and charity are all means through which religious movements and institutions today carve out and shape a particular space for the religious in the public sphere, often as a moral or even political alternative to the state (Davis and Robinson 2012; Muehlebach 2013).

6. Consecrated members of the Emmanuel Community choose to live celibate lives "for the kingdom" within the community. Consecrated sisters and brothers always dress in white and blue but live otherwise normal lives. Their vocation within the community is considered a missionary one.

7. All conversations and interviews were conducted in French and are my translation.

8. Benjamin's preoccupation with the relation between practicing Catholics and French nonbelievers is grounded in the general sense many of my interlocutors had of being marginalized, mocked, or rejected by the French public, their religious practice often considered ritualistic and retrograde.

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